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The People of Poquoson

Prue Salasky

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PEOPLE OF POQUSON

Ethnography Report

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English 678
Feb. 29, 2016

Part 1

What is ethnography?

Ethnography is the study of people and language in an everyday setting, what some might call "the vernacular" or the natural communication between people in an anthropological context. The vernacular has become fraught as a defining term, so it's perhaps best to describe it as "everyday" language, or whatever is encountered on a day-to-day basis in a particular speech community. By focusing on the minutiae of natural conversation, ethnography reveals in-depth information about an individual and their place in the community. It allows the researcher to drill down at the level of the individual and examine style, rather than looking for a broad sweep of information applicable across the board. The mantra of ethnography is that it looks "to discover rather than impose," according to Penny Eckert, in the preface to *Linguistic variation as a social practice* (2000); it's a search for the local, from the bottom up, in which the subjects dictate the categories rather than the researcher superimposing a category on the subject (s). Ethnographic fieldwork involves visiting a community and establishing relationships over time; among the best-known of these studies is the work of Eckert over two years of total immersion in Belten High School in Detroit. She defined ethnography as "a search for local categories" (Milroy & Gordon, 2003, p. 31). Ethnographic fieldwork is also distinguished by its lack of structure, letting the subjects dictate the topics of interest, rather than using the "modals" or predetermined topics favored by Bill Labov in his work in Martha's Vineyard and New York City, as cited in multiple sources. This too feeds into the idea of natural speech and discovery rather than imposition. Ethnography is considered the "third wave" of sociolinguistic study, evolving from broad categories and surveys, through study of the group, to focus on the individual as of primary social importance. It is particularly beneficial in examining close-knit and isolated communities for the markers that denote cultural and ethnic membership.

Benefits and limitations of Ethnography

As noted above, ethnography is loosely structured and focused on the individual – particularly by Lesley Milroy, who emphasized the importance of the individual speaker in the study of variation, characterizing each as "an agent in the process of convention-making" *(*Eckert, *Linguistic variation, p. 43).* It supplies a tremendous volume of reliable, detailed data of a microcosm. However, at the same time, the sheer volume of data can be wasteful, far more than can be used, estimated by one researcher as 10 times what's useful. Also, though it does not take place in isolation, the results are not typically generalizable. They hold true for a local community but may not be extrapolated to a wider analysis; that requires the addition of other methods, such as surveys. It also looks at a moment in time rather than offering a longitudinal study of variations over time. As it does not deal in representative samples, it can only answer qualitative rather than quantitative questions, and must be combined with the latter and its use of surveys and questionnaires to provide a more complete picture.

The heavy reliance on participant observation in ethnography also brings up the issue of bias in the observer and is dependent on the researcher's overall competence; interviewing is a skill that must be developed in order to elicit the most natural speech and avoid dialect suppression by participants.

Part 2

Methods

Thanks to the work of Dr. Bridget L. Anderson on "Voices of Tidewater," in particular chronicling the dialect and culture of the The Guineamen of Gloucester, others in the region have become aware of the

value of ethnography in recording their unique characteristics. Anthropologist Mary Clemons, whose family has deep roots in Poquoson, an independent city on the Virginia Peninsula, volunteers at the Poquoson Museum. She invited Dr. Anderson to address the group on the subject of dialects. Clemons noted her attempts to preserve and record both the dialect and the historic way of life of the people of Poquoson, once a closed society similar to the Guineamen. She offered to facilitate introductions between the old-timers of Poquoson and researchers/graduate students from Old Dominion University.

I corresponded with Mary Clemons and arranged to meet her at the museum – during one of her regular Sunday afternoon shifts – to learn more about her interests and those of the community. From here I used the "snowball" method, with her effecting introductions to three others, and from there I plan to expand outward through their social networks using the participant observation method.

At each meeting I allowed the subject to dictate the topics discussed, though I offered some follow-up questions and also, as I learned more about the community, was able to delve into social and cultural practices more deeply. I took detailed notes at each meeting and took photos of the surroundings and recorded the interviews on audiotape, which I stored in both WAV and MP3 format. In my first two interviews, there were two subjects each, which allowed me to also record the interchange between them in a more casual manner than if I was conducting a formal interview. In both instances, the subjects had physical evidence that they wanted to share, including historical books, maps and pictures. There was no request for anonymity and subjects were enthusiastic about the project and in suggesting others to contact who could add to the fabric of the research. The informed consent required for some projects such as these came under the umbrella provided by the permission given for "Voices of Tidewater."

I also had a tour of the Poquoson Museum and visited in "The Rootcellar," the room devoted to genealogy at the Poquoson Public Library. Each visit lasted approximately 2 1/2 hours, but there was no shortage of information or willingness to talk and I could easily have extended the visits. I endeavored to record not just their natural speech, but also their perception of the defining definitions of their dialect and how others speak.

I also supplemented the in-person fieldwork with materials purchased at the Poquoson Museum, a booklet "Poquoson's War between the States," published by The Poquoson Historical Commission, 1992; and a pictorial history of the different neighborhoods, "Images of America: Poquoson," by Poquoson Museum and Poquoson Historical Society, 2013. I also visited Weston Cemetery, mentioned by all interviewees, and observed the names of those buried there.

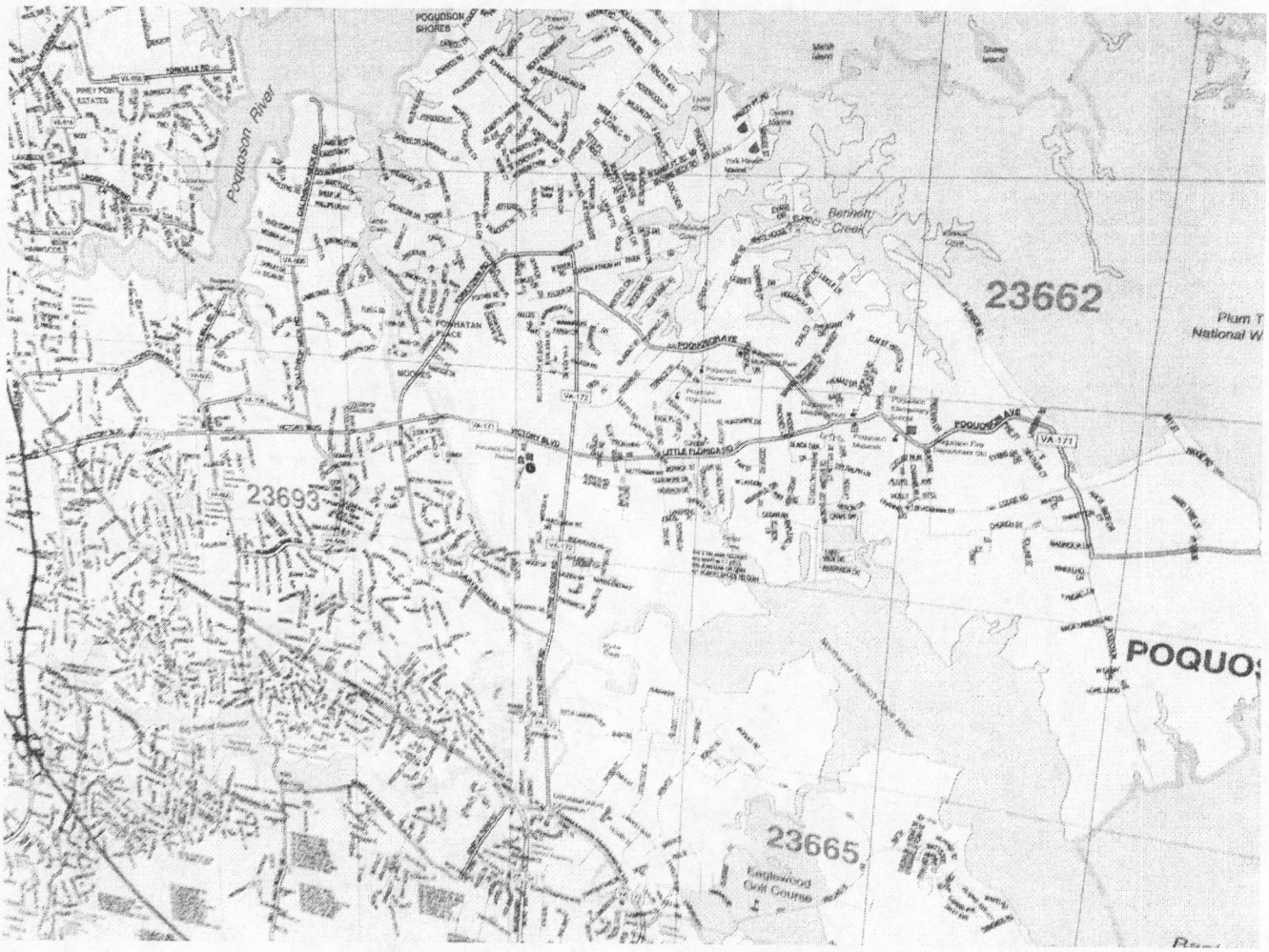
The basic purpose of the project was to record the dialect of those who grew up in the community to determine if there's a discernible pattern of local speech, which variations are in common use, and if there are any syntactical expressions or usage particular to the community. The interviews were confined to people with deep roots in the community who could also speak to its history and culture. (Several interviews are pending in addition to visits to other community landmarks mentioned, to include Eastern Cemetery, Sheffield's Store, and Amory's Wharf.)

From living in the Tidewater region for several decades I knew Poquoson as a waterman community that had developed into a favored location for NASA, Langley AFB, and hospital employees lured by its natural beauty and the excellent caliber of its schools. In the course of the study I quickly learned about an element I'd been unaware of --- a deep division, based on geography and class, between the

farmers living west of the current middle school and those living on the eastern side of the city who make a living from the water. Different families dating back to the 1600s are associated with each economic activity and the associated geography.

Poquoson good!

According to the city's web site, "poquoson" was a term used to describe a boundary line between two elevated tracts of land that contained a stream, river or creek with adjoining marsh. It was a widely used term along the East Coast of the United States. On the Virginia Peninsula, the term was coopted as the proper name for the 15 square miles of land bounded by the Old Poquoson River (now Wythe Creek) and the (New)Poquoson River. The city of Poquoson's other borders are Back River, the Chesapeake Bay, and on the western land side, York County. The city includes four times as much water as land in its overall 80 square miles and its northern border abuts the Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge, federal property closed to the public that was once used as a bombing range. Poquoson is first referenced in a land grant issued in Elizabeth City to Capt. Christopher Calthorpe in 1631; in 1634 one Benjamin Symms left a bequest for a free school for the children of the surrounding area. Several other schools developed in Poquoson and, in 1952, the southern portion of the Poquoson District, then in York Co., was incorporated to retain control over the schools. In 1975, the city form of government was adopted and Peggy Moore designed the city logo, incorporating the three major dates – 1631, 1952, 1975 – of the city's development.



The tan-colored area on the map delineates the city of Poquoson. The green at the upper right is federally owned land, once a bombing range, now a nature reserve that 's not open to the public. Alli Shriver pointed out that it's an easy boat ride from Jamestown to Poquoson and also from the Eastern Shore, both areas which supplied residents to the area.

Results

Interviews 1 and 2: My first interview was with Mary ~~Nealon~~ Clemons, whose grandparents grew up in Poquoson, and whose ancestors dated back to the building of Fort Wool, and moved to Portsmouth during the Depression, around 1933. When Nealon, an anthropologist, gave a talk in Poquoson in 2006, she found herself related to almost everyone there. Since then, she has immersed herself in the community. She provided a basic history of the community; commented as a "drive-here" on the dialect, "we say /dawlin/ for darling – there's a lot of /aw/ /ɔ/in the speech." The interview took place at the Poquoson Museum, started in 2000 on 15 acres of the former Dryden farm and located in the original, late 19th century farmhouse.

Nealon called in Theresa Forrest, whose family moved from Hampton to "the hayseeder country," when she was 5 years old; she married Stanley Carroll Forrest, a waterman, whose family goes back generations in muddy toes territory.

Interview 3: My next interview was with Bonnie Watkins Shriver, 64, and her husband Allison Shriver. Theirs is a "mixed marriage" of two families with long histories

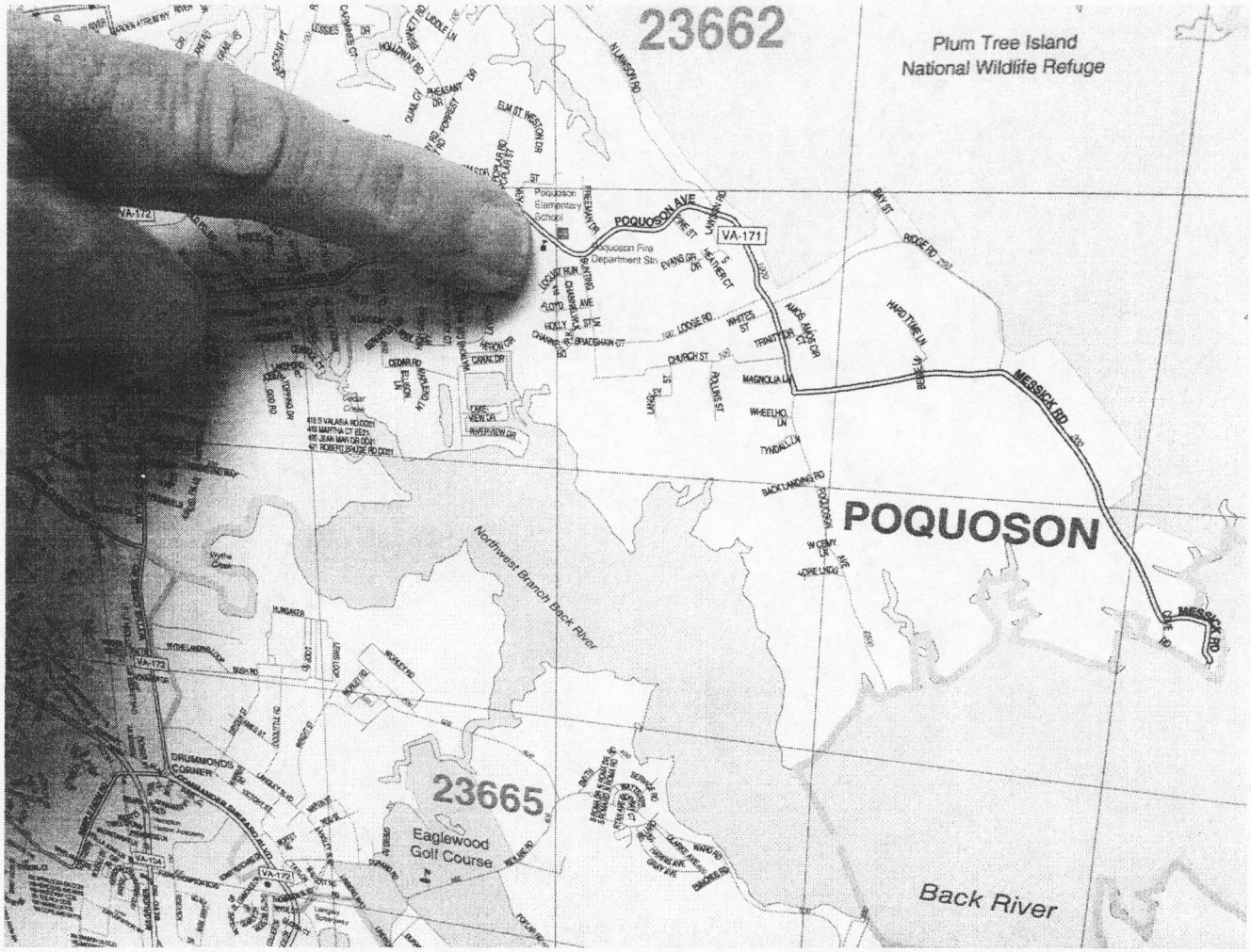
Interviewees described two main communities of practice within the city of Poquoson, the "muddy toes" or watermen, also known as "down-the-roaders," and the "hayseeders" or farmers, known as "up-the-roaders." These residents self-identified and agreed on the geographical boundaries of each, with the current middle school and elementary school on Poquoson Avenue serving as the dividing line. Their identity is a double one, of both occupation and territory.

These are the last names affiliated with each group ("both" indicates families that have ties to both sides":

Hayseeders/Up-the-roaders/farmers
Moore, Wornom, Smith, Hunt, Carmine, White, Dryden, Freeman (both), Holloway (1600s), Wainwright (both), Hudgins.

Muddy toes/Down-the-roaders/watermen
Forrest, Bradshaw (1600s from Maryland, Ft. Wool), Watkins (both) (1600s), Huggett (dying out), Fir, Martin, Bell (died out), Insley (late 18th century), Evans, Diggs, Messick and Amory; many from the Maryland Eastern Shore.

Muddy toes residents live east of the dividing line towards the water, while Hayseeders live west of it on higher ground. Poquoson Avenue leading to Messick Road is the main East/West thoroughfare, across which the division is made. (see map below)



Lifetime Poquoson resident Edwin Allison Shriver points out the dividing line between hayseeder/farmer/"up-the-road" territory and muddy toes/waterman "down-the-road" territory. Shriver grew up "down-the-road". He had a "mixed marriage" with Bonnie Watkins Shriver, who lived "on the cusp" between the two as the Watkins are known as watermen, but she came from a line of "hayseeders," her grandfather a farmer and stonemason, and her father an attorney, whom she likened to Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as he represented people from all over town, including African Americans from Cary's Chapel, an adjacent area of York County. The Watkins' family traces back to the 1600s in the area. Bonnie described herself as "shocked" as a teen, when she learned of the division between the "up-the-roaders" and "down-the-roaders", and remembered as a high-schooler that people from out of town would make fun of all people from Poquoson. She recalls that there was "some talk", particularly from her husband's mother, when she and "Alli" married. She says that the historic intra-community division has evolved to being between the old-timers and newer residents which has brought the "up-the-roaders" and "down-the-roaders" together. She says the old-timers accept the changes in the town more readily than those who've moved in more recently seeking the small-town experience that long-time residents had growing up.

Bonnie and Alli described the difference between the groups as one of class, with the "hayseeders" associated with higher education, in addition to which the banks and professional offices were all situated in hayseed territory. Both noted, however, that all watermen also had gardens and farmers had boats, so there was also a commonality. Bonnie mentioned that low-lying land and flooding were also

issues that divided them.
Theresa Forrest's husband Stanley grew up as a waterman and talked about friendly rivalries, such as football games played between the two sides of town, she said.

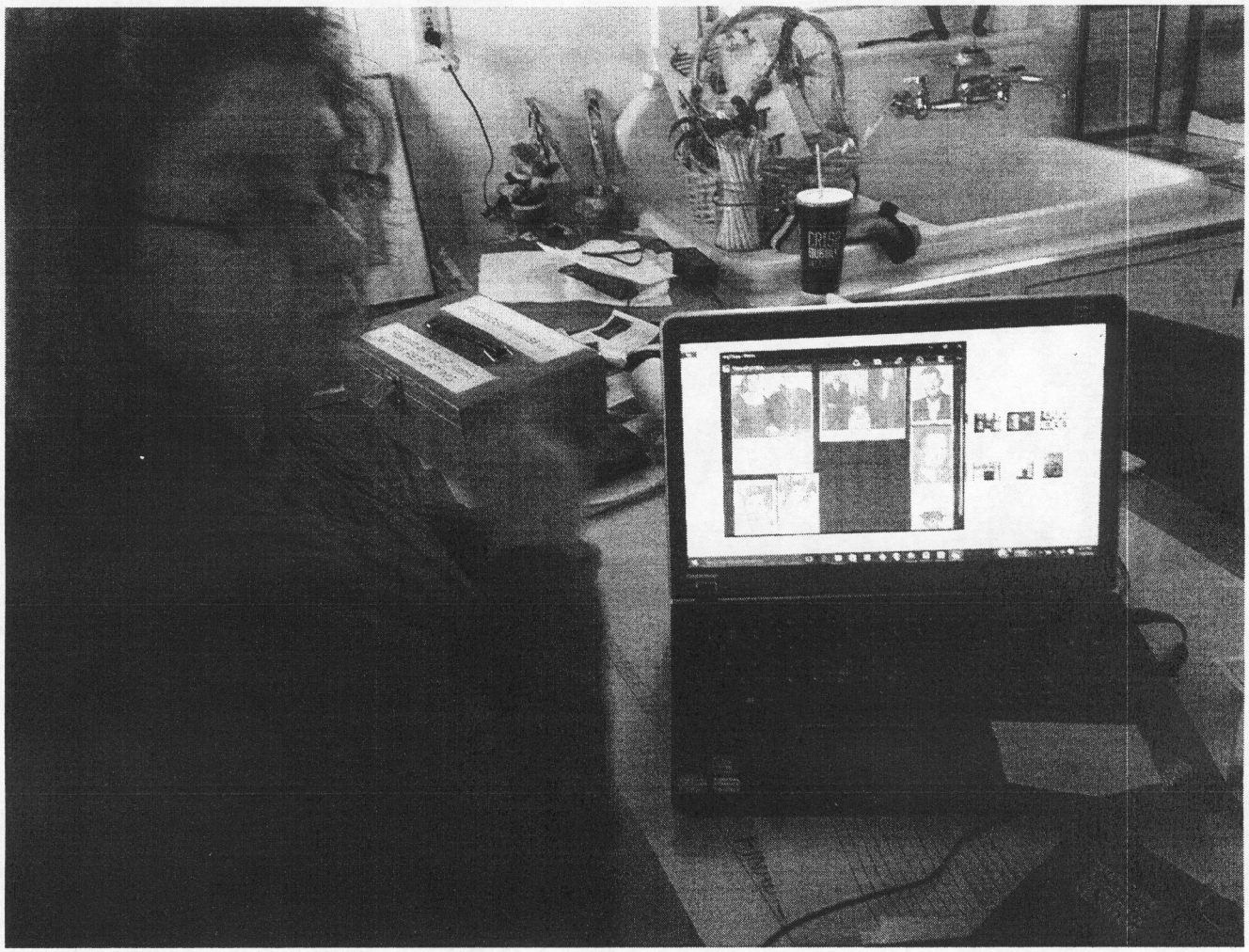
Even recently, when the Forrests moved house, they bought one where Stanley can see the house where he grew up. "My husband wouldn't buy beyond the middle school because that would make him an 'up-the-roader' . Buntin' Lane was the dividing line, and the ice house was across from the elementary school." They bought a house on a /si-ment/ platform where he can see the house where he grew up," said Theresa.

History: The history of the community, as described by interviewees and also in the compilations of genealogical data and memorabilia at the Poquson Museum and Library, is one of a self-reliant community, largely separated from outsiders until the 1960s, after the opening of NASA nearby and as more people had cars. They describe several influxes of residents from the 1630s on, particularly from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. "Crisfield, Somerset County, Smith Island – they're all the same names," said Mary Nealon. Other relocations occurred with the building of Fort Wool and the War of 1812, and again during the Civil War when Union troops came in to Fort Monroe. The latter came to Poquoson looking for supplies and spies and burned several workboats, according to local accounts preserved at the Museum. Though reluctant to take sides, and often going AWOL to return to their fishing and farming, the men joined The York Rangers of the Confederate Army and fought from the Battle of Big Bethel, one of the first battles, up to the surrender at Appomattox. They'd go AWOL from time to time to return to fishing and farming, according to Franklin T. Carmines in *Poquoson's war between the states,* 1992, which records the status of each soldier, whether deserter, killed, or returned home. There is no evidence that the Civil War divided the community; after the Civil War, interviewees all noted, it became a very closed community – for approximately 100 years --- up until 1958 when NASA opened and people working there moved into the community and people stayed after retirement. Seafood processing was an affiliated part of the economy for a while when the crabbing, oystering, clamming and scalloping on the surrounding waters flourished. The oyster beds /bidz/ were strong for a long time, said Nealon. Now there's an attempt to restore the water industry through aquaculture, she said.

The Poquoson Museum opened in 2000. It's situated on 15 acres of the Dryden farm, which was one of the last working farms in Poquoson, and has a walking trail down to the creek. The house is the original late-19th century structure, built in the Eastern Shore style, according to Mary Nealon, museum volunteer. It has several permanent exhibits, along with a special exhibit on the Fire Department's 75th anniversary, and a room set up as one of the little stores that used to dot the city.

Community/names: Each interviewee talked about the web of interrelationships, the extended families, the cousins, and above all the influence of former generations, their parents and grandparents. "She and I are distant cousins of course. My great-grandmother used to braid her hair," Mary Nealon said of the connection between Barbara Hudgins Whitlow (future interview) of Messick Road (watermen territory) and her family. "Barbara is my husband's cousin," said Theresa Forrest. First names are passed from generation to generation – there are a lot of Williams and Thomases – and a series of nicknames have developed within families – "spud" "tater" "big bubba" "little bubba"– for no known reason. "Stan's grandmother's name was Birdie, that's how my daughter got her middle name," said Forrest, whose nephew Elijah "Tommy" Thomas Forrest III is also known as "Bub". He husband Stanley, though, was named for the doctor who delivered him, the younger son of father/son doctors White; the young doctor later died in a car accident. "I put the branch on the tree. My sister's children were my husband's cousins – she married a Firth. He became their uncle," said Forrest, referencing the

interrelationship between families. Nealon added, "Her husband's mother was a Forrest before she married a Forrest." Stan's aunt's name is BethanyAnn, "but they call her Peppy."
Many of the first names are also Biblical, such as Jeremiah, Ira, Abraham.
When Forrest talks about learning baton-twirling in a garage, she identifies the teacher Glendola Bryant as "actually a Watkins," referencing an historical family name.
Between themselves, Nealon and Forrest discuss the local landmarks and topography, Black Walnut Road, the cart road and bridge and abandoned well; and "Fayhams", spelling unkown, a neighborhood in "down-the-road" territory. Family names are associated with particular streets and neighborhoods. All recall multiple little stores and barbershops. The Tom Hunt store, the post office for Odd, named for the Oddfellows Hall, has been donated to the museum, according to Nealon. Miss Becky's Store, now abandoned, sits next to the museum. Only Sheffield's Store (proposed interview) still remains. There were also multiple post offices, according to Nealon: Ernest, "a rare post office" at the end of Amory's Wharf; Moore's; Poquoson, Odd, Jeff's, and Messick. There was boatbuilding in people's yards.



Mary Nealon pulls up a page of digitalized photos of her grandparents and their generation. "To see your grandparents young, that's something," she said. Her family forebears are Bradshaws. She picks out a great aunt whom she says she favors. "Here's my father's first cousin, Bunting, married into them," she said. "The Buntin's on Pasture, down the lane from me," added Forrest.

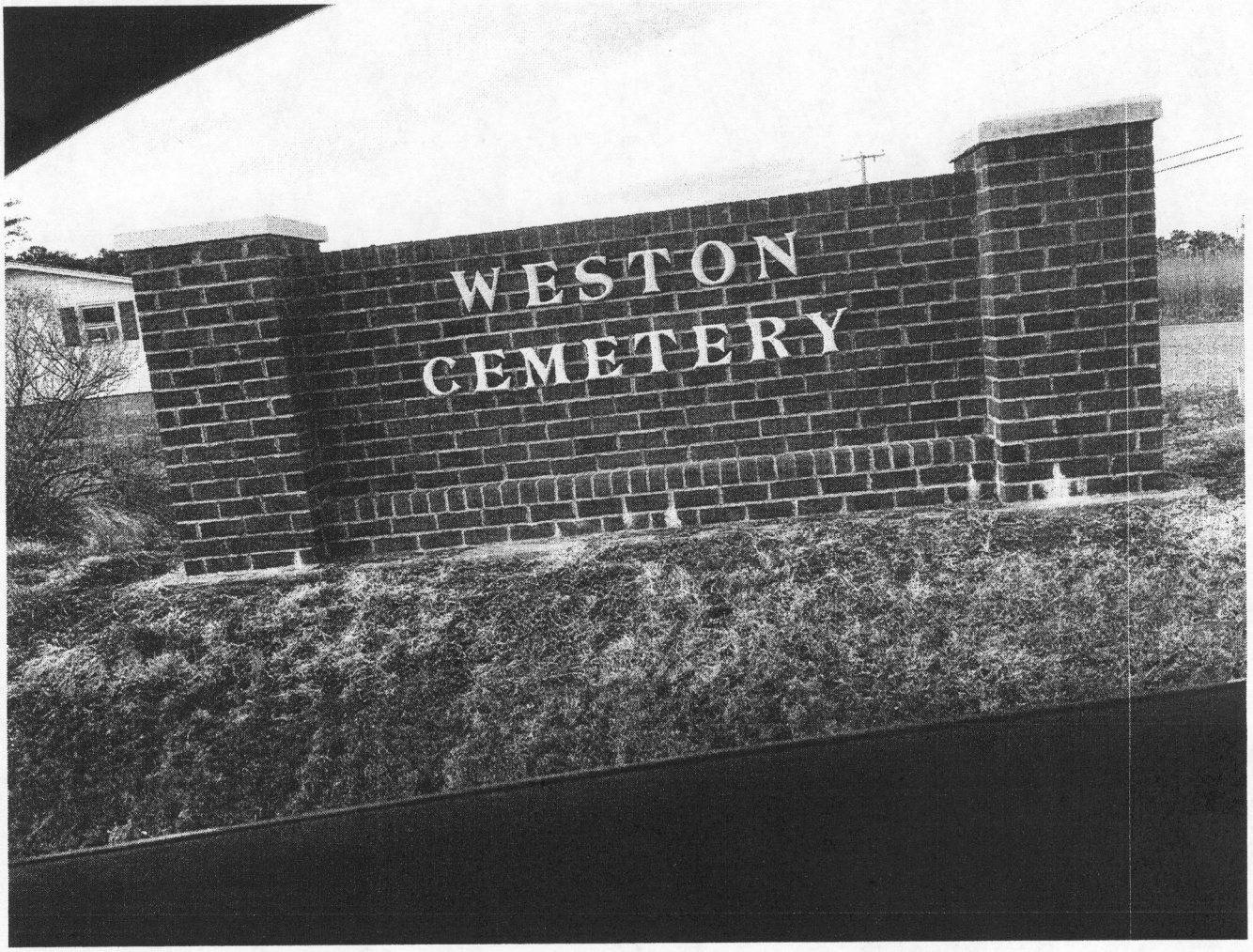
Dialect: Interviewees both volunteered information about their dialect and used variations in keeping with their descriptions. Theresa Forrest recounted a story about when her husband, Stanley, a scalloper, was in Alaska and a former NASA worker recognized his dialect as particular to Poquoson. "It's a little bit of the way you say words," she said.

Here, Theresa Forrest looks at an old map of Poquoson. In the background the seal of the city of Poquoson is visible; its first charter in 1631, then 1952 and most recently 1975. Both she and her husband Stanley Forrest grew up in "down-the-road" territory; the Forrest family belongs to the waterman heritage and he would never consider living beyond the middle school dividing line. He lives within sight of the house he grew up in a house on a /si-ment/ block.

Theresa Forrest noted that she used vowel-raising in her name for her father and mother, calling

them /dIdI/, and /mumu/ respectively. (This was not evident in the speech of 'hayseeder' Bonnie Shriver, who said /daedI/ when referencing her father. Variationist syntax that Forrest used in conversation included:
"had went with him to work,"
"him and his brother both",
"didn't bother him none"
"seen what the product end up being".
Forrest observed that she couldn't distinguish the local pronunciation of /bum/ as to whether it meant the bum in the street or a bomb out of context, an apparent merger of /ʌ / and / ɔ/, a raising and centralizing feature. Likewise, when referring to Barbara Jane/Jean, she could not distinguish between the two middle names, indicating the raising of the front mid-vowel /ei/ to /i/ . In keeping with the "chain vowel shift", the historic name "Insley" is pronounced /ɛnzli/, a lowering and opening of the closed high front vowel. And the low central vowel /ai/ in "retired" becomes /a/ as in /rə-tard/ .
The dropping of the word-final /g / as in /interestin/ was displayed by all speakers; and sometimes the word-final /d/ and /t/ were also dropped as in /aksIden / for accident, and /lan rɛkərdz/ for land records. "A lot of stuff we say, /dɔwlin/ for darling," said Mary Nealon. "We use a lot of /ɔ/ as in /wɔtaɹ/ for water." "My son always wanted me to say /wɔtaɹ/, said Theresa, referencing her 17-year-old. The near-mergers, such as "ferry/furry," described by Labov in *When Intuitions Fail* are also evident in the local speech. Here are some examples of phonological variations recorded in Poquoson speakers:
Hunt/Həɹrnt/
tarred/tɔwd/
tired/tard/
piano/pyannəɹ/
down/dauw-en/
here/hi-yar/
there/thei-yəɹ/
fire/far/
college/carlɛdʒ/
pilings/parlinz/
retired/rə-tard/
backfired/baekfard/
issues/iʃəɹz/
Maryland/Məɹlaend/
William & Mary/WIyɛm-ɛn-Məɹi/
very/vəɹi/
areas/əɹyɛʒ/
American/ɛməɹkʌn
arrowheads/aerəɹhɛd/
men/myɛn/
fights/fai-yɛts/
dead/dei-yɛd/
honored/arnəɹd/
honest/arnəst/
shadows/ʃaedəɹz/
upstairs/ʌp-stei-yəɹz/
chair/chei-yəɹ/

we can work on these together, but it is a great start! AMBITIOUS!



Cemeteries

The grave markers at Weston Cemetery, it was owned by William Weston but is usually pronounced "Western" in opposition to the other large cemetery, Eastern, records many of the city's dead going back to 1789. There are multiple other cemeteries, many of them private or on family land, throughout the city. The church cemeteries have run out of space.

Interpretation

While each interviewee attested to a "closed" society, in which residents would likely be unwilling to talk, they each spoke freely and loquaciously about their ties to Poquoson. Each, almost immediately, raised the historic division between "up-the-roaders" and "down-the-roaders" and self-identified with one or other of the groups. Each fluently cited their family's historic ties to the community, knew when they arrived there – whether 1600s or 1800s – and could make multiple connections between different families. Place was given tremendous importance with roads (Huntsneck Road; /Həɹrnts-nɛk/; Messick Road; Holloway Road etc.) and docks (Amory) named for families and the provenance of different names cited. The reverence for the past and for elders was extraordinary, all citing their grandparents' generation, knowing all the names of the extended family, recalling the stories they told and how they lived, and even being able to pinpoint the dates of death – e.g. Aug. 2 – of different grandparents. The reverence for ancestors included the importance of cemeteries – whether the large ones, Eastern and Weston, or the small family burial grounds. All, independently, spoke of the life of the community not being an easy one, but hard-scrabble and self-reliant – their grandparents typically lived without

electricity, with well water, and with outdoor facilities. They talked about particular families dying out – not from moving away, but from members not marrying. "When they started dating, it was kind of frowned upon," said Bonnie Shriver, describing whole families who never married.

They uniformly described idyllic childhoods of great freedom to roam and play and gather in safety. They also mentioned the large number of stores/post offices that served as community centers for information and gossip. And they took great pride in their schools and the emphasis throughout on education, even though traditionally the watermen didn't graduate from high school, taking to the water in their early teens. That was one of the distinctions between the "down-the-roaders" and the "up-the-roaders," the children of the land-based group typically had greater education. (Bonnie Shriver told a wonderful story about how her father went to William and Mary Law School on a $5 gold coin he won in debate and gave to his uncle as collateral.)

Indicative of how strong the identifications are with heritage showed up frequently. "I married into it," Theresa Forrest said, indicating that even living in the community since age 5 and attending schools did not qualify her as part of the community's heritage. Likewise, Alli Shriver, a "down-the-roader," said, "I don't say I live in Poquoson, I ~~say I'm *from* Poquoso~~n." That emphasis making the crucial separation between those who belong to the older community and those who don't. His wife, Bonnie Watkins Shriver, ("My daddy had two daughters and I wanted to keep the name," referencing the Watkins who date back 400 years) summed up the sense of belonging to a place: "You feel differently when your ancestors are buried /bəɹhɛd/ here /hya/ that's not something you can convey."

Striking in its absence was that there was no mention of church except in reference to where people wanted to be buried, and that Union Baptist ran out of space. Asked about the center of the community, no one mentioned church, which seemed unusual for a small community in Virginia.

It was remarkable, within the first few minutes of the first interview to discover a group that identified so closely with a strong sense of insiders and outsiders; that this identity has a double connection, in both geographical place and economic occupation was even more remarkable. The stability of generations, captured in the place names, the business names, the cemetery markers, and store names, make this a truly remarkable community for ethnographic study. The self-awareness of the subjects, both in identity and heredity, and in the recognition of their peculiar status, is highly unusual. The consistency in their language use – and the suggestion, through Theresa Forrest, that her son did not speak the same way as he wanted her to say the word "water" repeatedly, indicates that there's been a shift in dialect in the younger generation that would fit with the more mainstream contact of a broader population group and influx of people from outside the region.

Conclusion

As described in the Guineamen project, the subjects in Poquoson had a very strong sense of the group, of 'us vs. them' initially in an intra-community sense, the "hayseeders vs. muddy toes" representing the us vs. them characteristic of tight-knit communities. With the city's expansion and growth in the 1960s and 1970s, the sense of identity is increasingly moving towards old-timers vs. newcomers, according to the families interviewed. Despite a falling population and an aging one, Poquoson has become a coveted place to live, quite different from the "otherness" that interviewees described growing up and the scorn they felt from residents of more urban areas. The 2010 U.S. Census shows a 94 percent white population that's older and more educated than the state norm; it also has a higher percentage of home-ownership, a higher median household income and higher house values than the state average. This is attributable to an influx of NASA, Langley AFB and hospital employees, drawn by the schools and the environment. At one time, the Shrivers, both lifetime residents, could recognize what family everyone belonged to by their physical appearance – "The Forrests, they were tall, good-looking people," said Bonnie Watkins Shriver, while her husband, Alli, recalled that they were also known for their tempers. "There were some people you didn't mess with," he added. "It was an event if you saw an out-of-state

license plate," he noted. In their youth, in the 50s and 60s, the city had a population of 2,000.
In order to get a more accurate view of the community, there are many more interviews to be conducted and places to visit. Because of its geography and limited population, these should eventually give a well-rounded picture of a community that's now in flux. In order to ascertain the use of variations, it's necessary to conduct more interviews with those who identify with the two different groups within the community, and also to talk to some of the younger people.
To expand the project even further, there's an opportunity to pursue the links to the Guineamen of Gloucester through marriage, and also to the people of communities on the Maryland Eastern Shore and Smith Island, where many trace their ancestors to.

This is a work in progress, and there's more to be done in exploring any potential variationist differences in dialect between the two self-identified groups and certainly more to be done in creating a genealogy of the inter-relationships among the remaining families.

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Vowel chart provided by Bridget Anderson.

Interviews:
Feb. 14, 2016 at the Poquoson Museum, 968 Poquoson Ave., Poquoson.
Mary B. Clemons ("and Theresa Forrest (Stanley Forrest)

Feb. 24, 2016 at the Poquoson Library, Main St., Poquoson.
Bonnie Watkins Shriver, 64, and Edwin Allison "Alli" Shriver (wife and husband)

Potential interviews : Barbara Hudgins Whitlow (scheduled); Sonny Insley; Stanley Forrest; Ray Carmines.

Two hours of taped recordings available in WAV and MP3 formats.